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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of video cameras as a teaching tool in English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classrooms, with emphasis on their use in EFL college courses in East Asian countries. The paper reviews the availability and use of video cameras, especially for instructors who may be unfamiliar with their operation. Language teachers can use video cameras to record student dialogues and role plays, reviewing the tape with students to critique language usage and grammar. The recording of humorous or student-created skits can heighten student interest in such activities. The re-recording of dialogues and skits allows students to compare their most recent performance with earlier renditions. Overall, the use of video cameras in the EFL classroom allows students to analyze their own speaking abilities, observe their own body language, and become more self-critical of their abilities. Teachers can use exceptional performances as examples for future classes. An appendix lists helpful hints for using the video camera in the classroom. (MDM)

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VIDEO CAMERAS IN EFL CLASSROOMS: UTILIZING THE NEW TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

Walk down any street in downtown Taipei or Tokyo, Seoul or Singapore, Hong Kong or Bangkok and you see shop after shop crammed with electronic toys--TVs and tape recorders, VCRs and video cameras, compact discs and laser discs. East Asia is indeed at the forefront of technology from semiconductors to HDTV. These days, Made in Japan means the highest quality--Sony, NEC, Toshiba, among others, and even formerly derogatory epithets such as MIT--Made in Taiwan, are now seen in a more positive light as brand names such as National and Tatung have come to stand for dependability. Whether producer or distributor, East Asian nations abound in AV equipment.

East Asian countries also share another feature--an examination-based education system. The elementary pupil learns early that he must study hard in order to enter the best junior high school, where he must study even harder to get into the best senior high school, which may be in a city far from his home, necessitating his living with distant relatives or at the school dormitory. There he must memorize all he can in order to pass

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the most important hurdle--the college entrance examination. Failure at any step along the way means future chances for success are dim. Hence, cram schools flourish and children spend most of their waking hours poring over books.

Do these children get any recreation? Perhaps for a few hours on the weekend or during vacations. Because the better high schools tend to be in the cities, older children's recreation consists not of a swim in the local water hole or an imaginative treasure hunt to a nearby cave, but a walk down a busy street dodging impatient pedestrians and even more impatient car and motorcycle drivers. The private refuge is not a mountain cave but a pachinko or MTV parlor. If our student chooses instead to stay at home, he may turn on the TV and challenge his mental reflexes with video games.

Though we may bemoan this lack of opportunity for communion with nature, we can take one lesson from it: many of our students are more familiar with operating electronic equipment than we are, and they take VCRs and MTV for granted the way an earlier generation regarded transistor radios and 45 rpm records. Since electronic toys and both available and affordable, and since students are proficient in their use for leisure activities, there is no reason not to adapt the technology to the classroom. Indeed, we already have many ESL/EFL texts with video components, and journal articles and even workshops showing us how to use ELT or authentic video to teach or practice language skills.

This paper/demonstration, however, is not about already

existing videos, but about making your own--using a video camera in the classroom as a teaching tool. The audience this paper addresses are (1) teachers who have never thought of using technological tools in the classroom and have no idea of their potential, and (2) teachers who would like to videotape student activities but do not know where or how to begin. Therefore, several suggestions on types of speaking activities suitable for videotaping are given. These are accompanied by videotaped excerpts from English classes at Taiwan's National Tsing Hua University. Advantages for both students and teachers are given and conclusions drawn. Suggestions for actual operation of the equipment in the classroom are included in the Appendix.

Activities Appropriate for Videotaping

First, let me ask you a few questions. How many of you have a television at home? How about a VCR? How many of you receive satellite TV? Yes, we're so lucky here to have all the latest technology.

Now, how many of you have ever watched a TV with your English class? Did you use a VCR and play an English teaching tape? Did you use something you taped from a TV program? Yes, VCR's in schools are becoming more and more common.

Now, how many of you have a video camera at home? How many have ever used it in class? Well, why not?

Maybe your school can't afford it, although we are getting more and more technology in the schools. Or maybe it's the case that your school would buy a video camera, but no one would use it. Why is that? There are some people who are afraid of

machines, while others seem to break everything they touch. Still others may want to use a video camera but have no idea how to apply it to the teaching situation.

If you fit into one of these categories, then you've come to the right place. Today I'm going to give you your first taste of some activities you can conduct with your classes using the video camera and VCR playback. I'm not going to show you how to operate a video camera: we don't have the time nor enough equipment for that. The salesman can show you the basics and you can read your manual. If you can operate an audiotape recorder, then you can operate a video camera; it uses the same basic functions plus a few extras. What I am going to do is to show you some of things I've done in my classes and to try to convince you how useful and how much fun this little machine is.

When we think of using a video camera, we may think of recording performances. This is a very good idea. We certainly want to remember the class play, and the student actors may also want a copy. But there's another use, rehearsal. At National Tsing Hua University, our seniors in the Foreign Language Department practice for their annual class play by occasionally recording scenes and viewing them together, analyzing problems and making changes. Students can learn to critique their own performances, verbal as well as nonverbal. This is how a video camera can be used as a teaching tool.

For a start in the classroom, consider recording role plays. At beginning levels, we may even record pairs reciting a given dialogue. Most students will put in their own acting when they

know they will be on TV. Let me show you what you may get with a partially guided role play, when students are just given a few sentences to set the situation. These are freshmen foreign language majors, and the situation is "You found you have the winning number in the lottery. You had put the ticket in the pocket of an old coat, and your wife gave the coat away." This is the middle of the role play.

SHOW EXCERPT 1

Of course, there are some problems here, so while watching, we can also take the opportunity to point out grammar or pronunciation errors. How often do you have this problem? If you interrupt a role play to correct an error, it breaks the momentum, breaks the mood. But if you wait until the students are finished, students don't remember what they said and your correction falls on deaf ears. But when you can replay it, there's the evidence; students see exactly what they did. After viewing, you can ask the students to revise their role plays and perform them again during the next class, when we can again record and then compare the first and second versions.

I've found students are sometimes a bit apprehensive, so get to know them and the activity first. Don't record role plays the first time you ever do role plays, for example. Also, tell them they will be actors on TV. Encourage them to bring their own simple props. Afterwards, watch as soon as possible, while the excitement lasts. If you have a two-hour class, you can record during the first hour, watch during the second hour. Most groups prepare funny role plays and we all enjoy watching. Students

love using a leisure device in the classroom, and that novelty peaks their interest.

Now here's an example of an assignment with maximum freedom. Freshmen foreign language majors were told to make up their own TV commercials. Here's one of my favorites.

SHOW EXCERPT 2

Getting freshmen used to seeing themselves on TV prepares them for sophomore speech, where watching and critiquing their performances is a much more serious matter. When speeches are recorded, students get to see themselves as others see them. For most it's a shock. They don't know how nonfluent they are. That can be a very traumatic experience. That's why I watch with individuals or small groups the first time, to reassure them, point out the good aspects, and offer suggestions for improving areas that are deficient. If you, the teacher, have a positive relationship with your students and if you use video critiquing not as a way of putting students down but as a way of building them up to work toward improvement, then a potentially painful activity can turn into a uniquely enjoyable one. In fact, some students have even made copies of their speeches to take home to show Mom and Dad.

Students tend to feel better about recording and about their own performances the second time around. After seeing their problems, most try to improve and it shows. By videotaping more than once, you give the students a chance to compare the most recent performance with previous performances. If you have the

facilities, you may even want to record each speech and have students work together in groups planning and revising presentations and self-critiquing.

In order to better prepare freshmen for sophomore speech, in the second semester of the first year I assign students at least one activity in which they have to invent a story (a task they have performed in group discussion sessions the first semester) and tell it in front of the class. In this unit, which I call simply the music assignment, students are each given a different piece of music on audiotape approximately three minutes in length and asked to use their imaginations and make up a story around the music for the next class. Students can combine music and story in any way they wish. This story was told in spring 1991 by a second semester freshman.

SHOW EXCERPT 3

Advantages of Using the Video Camera

So what can we gain from videotaping students speaking in English? First, students are initially shocked when they see their weak areas in speaking. We have all had students whose only goal in giving a presentation was to get the unpleasant experience over with as soon as possible, preferably with a passing grade. The camera forces students to come face to face with their speaking abilities; they, together with the teacher, can identify specific problems and work to overcome them one by one. The camera gives students a way to really see their improvement.

Perhaps some of you may be concerned that we are expecting students to behave contrary to the cultural norms by which they were raised. "Chinese work best in groups; so you shouldn't ask a student to speak individually in front of the class. He's embarrassed. He may lose face, etc." Well, I've never heard of groups of students discussing their answers together while they were taking the college entrance examination!

While teachers should be sensitive to cultural differences, particularly foreign teachers, we also need to consider practical concerns. What is the student's purpose in learning the language? Will he do advanced study abroad or use it in the tourism industry or business sector? Will his profession require him to travel abroad or interact locally with foreigners using English? Many students today may not even be able to imagine to what use they will put their foreign languages in the future. We can probably assume that the further up the educational ladder the student is, the more likely he will be using English in an international context. Therefore, we will need to insist on proficiency in a more standard or international variety in addition to the local Chinglish or Singlish or Japlish.

Except in some refugee or immigrant situations, learning a new language is always additive, so learning how to behave in another way for another context merely increases one's options; the first language is still used with the same people with the same functions. We can say the same for culturally learned behavior; the student has acquired the additional skill of speaking individually in front of a group, a skill that is an

absolute necessity if he ever expects to function in western society or with westerners. And with the increasing democracy around us in East Asia, expressing one's ideas clearly and intelligently has become a vital skill even in one's native language.

A second advantage of using the video camera in the classroom is that we can observe body language and the use of visuals. At Tsing Hua University, many of the graduates of the Foreign Language Department are now working as teachers or bilingual secretaries; even for most other professions, we often have to share our ideas by showing as well as telling, as I'm doing right now. Students have to think of the most feasible, creative ways of showing what they mean, as this excerpt from a process speech shows.

SHOW EXCERPT 4

You see how this student has prepared all her material in advance.

Third, students can learn to become more self-critical. As mentioned above, they can see their problems and work to eliminate them, and they can watch their progress. Moreover, if students can learn to be critical of themselves and their own behavior, then they may also learn to evalaute the rhetoric and activities of the world around them more carefully.

Fourth, teachers can use the videotapes in two ways. You'll soon collect a mountain of potential research data. You can also recycle the material back to the classroom by using the best performances as examples in teaching future classes. You may be

able to teach rhetorical structure with an essay, but showing a speech is even better. Students not only know what you expect of them, but they also have a tangible goal to reach or exceed: "What last year's student could do, I can do even better."

Conclusions

The video camera is a relatively new tool for the classroom. Once teachers' apprehensions are overcome and their creativity sparked, the possibilities are endless. In today's presentation, I've given you some ideas for what you and your students can create in the classroom. In the Appendix you have some more technical suggestions for using the machinery. Once you get started, your imagination can take you in any number of directions that will suit your particular teaching situation.

Introducing a video camera into the classroom is not introducing a new methodology but extending an old one. How many of us have in the past used tape recorders in the language lab and asked students to record their voices and then compare their pronunciation or intonation with the native speaker model? Now the technology permits us to add the visual component and ask students to be self-critical, comparing both with their previous performances and with an ideal toward which they are still striving.

Our students live in a world in which they make daily use of electronic machinery. They are familiar with these devices and they asociate them with leisure fun and games. Using these recreational toys in the classrom is novel for them. Students

are interested; they like performing for the TV audience--themselves. Since they can see the finished product, they spend more time and expend more effort in preparation. And, finally, by seeing their performance in English, they have a basis for improving it. And that is, after all, our objective as language teachers.

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Appendix

HELPFUL HINTS FOR USING THE VIDEO CAMERA IN THE CLASSROOM

Using any tool without proper preparation can cause no end of trouble. However, a little practice with your video camera and attention to a few details will minimize your problems. Below are some pointers that I have found useful.

1. Preparing Equipment. Get to know your video camera. Have someone show you how to use it and practice with it on your own. Set it up yourself and make a test recording, even if it's just of the furniture in an empty classroom. You can play back your recording within the camera visually, without sound, to see that it worked. Although you may later have a student work as cameraman (students like having an important job), the teacher should still be able to operate the camera.

Before you use it, check the camera to see that it's in working order, especially if it's used by other people. If you will be using batteries, then make sure they are charged. Find your blank tape or a tape you can record over. Always take a spare battery and an extra tape; even brand new tapes can occasionally be defective.

2. Planning Logistics. Is your classroom appropriate for videotaping? Where will the students sit? Where will the students perform? Where will you place the camera? Is there enough light? Is there a minimum of noise? Can you get good shots of students (not too far, not too close) and can you pick up the sound? Most cameras have built-in, self-adjusting microphones, but you can also attach a separate microphone to place closer to the students.

How long will the activity take? Remember to consider the time between speeches or role plays. Some students may need a few minutes to set up their props. What will you do if the activity takes more time or less time than you planned?

3. Explaining Procedures. If there are any special rules or procedures, tell the class before you begin or during the previous class. For example, when we record speeches, we close the door. If a student should come late or be early for the next session (sometimes we record in shifts all in one afternoon to save time), she is to wait outside the classroom until she hears applause, indicating the speech is over, and then enter between speeches. This way there is no unnecessary disruption.

4. Videotaping. Get to the classroom early to set up, and always have a contingency plan. Will the activity be done even if you cannot videotape? If not, what else will you do? If the workmen decide to cut grass outside your window, can you move to a quieter classroom? If the electricity goes out, even if you are using batteries, the classroom lighting will probably be insufficient. Too much noise or not enough light can render your recording useless.

5. Checking and Copying the Tape. Watch the tape as soon as possible, checking it for any problems. You can save time by watching (and even grading) while you copy it. If your camera uses Video 8, you may want to copy on to VHS for convenience in viewing. Never give students the original, unless you have a knowledgeable student who will copy it for you. Make sure to have a teacher copy so that you can grade at your own convenience.

6. Viewing the Tape. If you plan to watch the tape with the students right after you record it, as in the case of role plays, make sure you know how to connect the video camera to that particular TV. It's usually as simple as connecting two wires from the camera to the TV's already connected VCR and changing one or two settings, but each machine's a little different. You don't want the students sitting around for ten minutes doing nothing while you fuss with the dials and connections.

If you use a VHS copy, although the students don't get instant feedback, playback is simpler and more flexible, because you don't need the camera. Students may even take a copy and watch on their own or, if you have an audio-visual center, you can put a copy there for the students to watch at their convenience.

7. Grading the Students. Grading videotaped oral performances can be more detailed because we can watch more than once. You may want to make an evaluation form for yourself emphasizing the important areas you are grading. You can give the students a copy so they can see how you graded them and why. You can make self-evaluation sheets for students when they watch their own speeches; if you require students to turn in their self-evaluation sheets, then you have a check on whether they actually went to view their speeches, and you can see how critical they are of themselves.

8. Evaluating the Activity. Sometime before the end of the semester, get students' reactions to the activity and ask for their suggestions on how to improve it. Sometimes students have some very good ideas of what would be useful for them.